The place of social work in sustainable development: Towards ecosocial practice

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Running head: Place of social work in sustainable development

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Abstract

Ecological questions are seldom seen to concern the social dimension, and, accordingly, to be of direct concern to mainstream social work practice. However, the current ‘social-ecological crisis’ demands a major social transition to a sustainable society that touches all dimensions of our lives. So, social work cannot escape this process. This article argues that social work can engage in this transition starting from its social mission and tradition, provided it includes the ecological environment as an important element of practice and develops an ecosocial practice centred on empowerment, social capital formation and resilience building as both a contribution to and part of a process of social-political change.

Introduction

Climate change is the tip of the iceberg of a global ecological crisis relating to biodiversity and the availability of fertile land, sustainable food production and finite water and energy resources (Rockström et al., 2009). Even Flanders in Belgium, a country of immense ‘wealth’, is confronted with the loss of open spaces, air pollution, traffic noise and related health problems. Poor people are the most affected by these crises, given that the global ecological and economic crises have exacerbated the ever-widening gap between the rich and poor (UNDP, 2010). This presents major challenges for social work, given its central concern with social justice. Yet, despite the growing link between social and ecological problems, ecological sustainability has remained marginalised by social work despite its claimed awareness of the broader environment. However, the focus of this broader awareness has been limited to the social environment. Since sustainable development, in the dominant discourse, is mainly conceived as environmental management, it has not received due attention from social work, despite the overlap between social and ecological problems. At the same time, a focus on the ecological dimension of sustainable development means the social dimensions of environmental problems and the role of non-scientific disciplines are often overlooked by society.

This article argues that sustainable development is an area of legitimate focus for the social work profession and asks why sustainable development should be an issue for social work and how sustainability connects with its core social mission. In engaging with these notions, the article considers the relationship between sustainable development and social work practice. In developing this relationship, this article builds upon a research project on orienting social work toward sustainable development at the Department of Social Work of Leuven University College (Peeters & Bevers, 2009) which worked from the assumption that an appropriate interpretation of sustainable development for social work should meet two essential conditions: (i) it should take account of contemporary analyses of the ecological crisis; and (ii) it should recognise synergies between the social-ecological mission and the critical tradition of social work. These conditions make social work ideally suited to address issues of sustainable development and the environmental crisis at this historical juncture. This article begins with a brief overview of ecological theory in social work before providing a view on sustainable development and its connection to social work practice.
Growth of ecosocial work

Social work is a context-based profession concerned with the way in which humans are supported by their social environment, that is, the social networks and support systems that enable humans to lead full and flourishing lives. Social work practice, however, has been rarely linked to the bio-physical context or the growing number of social organisations focusing on environmental considerations and ecological sustainability. Hence ecological concerns are rarely seen as an intrinsic aspect of the profession's ambit. To accommodate broader environmental concerns, therefore, social work has to develop its theoretical framework to encompass the ecological environment. Närhi and Matthies (2001) in Europe and Coates (2003) in North America have sought to re-envision social work in light of the ecological crisis (see also Molyneux, 2010; Zapf, 2010).

Table 1. Ecological tradition in social work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time period</th>
<th>Roots of ecological social work traditions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1990: late modern society</td>
<td>Convergence of different perspectives Ecological social work (Besthorn, 1997; Coates, 2003) Ecosocial approach (Matthies et al., 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circa 1995 onwards</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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Source: Adapted from Närhi and Matthies (2001:38)
Table 1 outlines Närhi and Matthies’ (2001) interpretation of the roots of ecological thinking in social work, which they trace ‘back to the very first days of social work itself’ (p. 19) and two divergent perspectives on how the notion of the environment and its significance for human welfare is understood. Mary Richmond (1922) emphasised the importance of social interaction and social networks for social casework establishing the dominant focus on the social environment, later known as the ‘person-in-environment’ approach, while Jane Addams’ focus was the ‘urban environment’ (Addams, 1910 in Staub-Bernasconi, 1989, p. 296): ‘In addition to the social environment, [Addams saw that] the living environment also contains the physical and built environment (housing conditions, pollution etc.) and local services (sanitation, hygiene etc.)’ (Närhi & Matthies, 2001, p.18).

In the 1970s, systems theory in the social sciences had a major impact on social work. Following Pincus and Minahan (1973) in the USA, others soon developed differing interpretations in applying systems thinking to social work (Germain, 1991; Germain & Gitterman, 1980; Meyer, 1983, 1995; Wendt, 1982, 1990). Although this evolving ‘systems approach’ included the natural environment, classical person-in-environment thinking focused on the relationship between humans and the social environment with nature as a background feature:

If the physical environment is consistently dropped from the diagrammed models of practice, it comes as no surprise that the assessment tools offered in mainstream practice textbooks concentrate primarily on aspects of social functioning, social networks, and social roles ... Organizing data for an assessment using genograms and eco-maps limits the view to the social environment (Zapf, 2010, p. 33).

Such an approach was not conducive to developing an understanding of the relationship between the environmental crisis and social work. However, growing environmental awareness during the 1960s and its continued diffusion into society at the beginning of the 1970s led to discussions about ecology or the physical environment in the social sciences influenced by the ecological or ‘green’ movement which provided a critical perspective. By the 1980s, a small core group of social work academics began to take the natural environment and questions of sustainability seriously (Berger & Kelly, 1993; Estes, 1993; Hoff & McNutt 1994; Matthies, 1987, 1990; Opielka, 1985; Opielka & Ostner, 1987). This way of ecological thinking seems to be consistent with Jane Addams’ approach to environmental thinking in social work. Närhi and Matthies (2001), referred to it as ‘the eco-critical approach’ (p. 46) since it concerned:

... an environmental critical orientation toward the entire development of modernisation. This line of thinking has promoted the awareness of ecological crises and environmental questions. The increasing gravity of the situation of environmental problems has lead to environmental discussions permeating society, which means that environmental questions are connected to the very fundamentals of society: its structures, its ways of life and values.

In Germany, Informationsdienst Sozialarbeit (1981), an organisation of various left and alternative movements, introduced the first explicit discussion about the connection between ecology and social work, which resulted in the idea of a paradigm shift toward an ‘eco-social approach’ (Opielka, 1985:11) in social policy and social work through the
transformation of the ‘social question’ into the ‘eco-social question’ (Matthies, 1990; Opielka, 1985; Opielka & Ostner, 1987). In North-America, the discussion of the eco-social approach began later with Soine (1987), Berger and Kelly (1993), Hoff and Pollack (1993) and Hoff and McNutt (1994) whose critical application of the ecosystems approach extolled the importance of new institutional arrangements to consider the natural environment and finite natural resources as fundamental for social policy:

In the discussions of both the German and the Anglo-American eco-critics, the main point stressed is that social workers should act as political actors, and that they should have a political agenda and the possibility to guide society in the direction of sustainable development (Närhi & Matthies, 2001, p. 33)

According to Närhi and Matthies (2001), there was an increasing convergence between the ecocritical and ecosystems approaches to ecology in social work. While the latter began to see ecological questions – and the element of nature – as areas of concern for the system (e.g. Germain, 1991), in the former Hoff and McNutt (1994) related ecosystems thinking to issues of sustainability. Both in North America and Europe, authors sought to reinterpret ecosystems as a consciousness-raising, change-oriented approach (Payne, 2005). Hoff and McNutt (1994) re-envisioned the ‘person-in-environment’ for an ‘ecological social work’ beyond the social (see also Besthorn, 1997). The subsequent critical orientation outlined by Coates (2003) and two special issues of Critical Social Work (Besthorn, 2003; Coates & Besthorn, 2010) centred on a fundamental critique of modern Western culture urging the need for a paradigm shift toward a ‘holistic’ understanding of the human–nature relationship with focused attention on spirituality as a vital component.

In Europe, the ecosocial work approach moved from Germany to Finland (Matthies, 1987, 1990), and was made concrete in field projects, followed by a European project in three cities in Finland, Germany and the UK, centred on social exclusion and sustainable living environments (Matthies, Närhi & Ward, 2001; Matthies, Turunen, Albers, Boeck & Närhi, 2000; Närhi, 2004). Peeters’ (2010a) work with colleagues on the relation between social work and sustainable development in Flanders, Belgium is furthering this ‘ecosocial approach’, stressing the need for a new paradigm. An increasing number of authors are contributing to these developments (Coates, Gray & Hetherington, 2006; Elsen, 2011, Gamble & Hoff, forthcoming; Mary, 2008; Muldoon, 2006; Norton, 2009; Shaw, 2008; Van Wormer & Besthorn, 2010; Zapf, 2009). Meanwhile, in developing countries, the relationship between social work and sustainable development is a growing concern (e.g., Agoramoorthy & Hsu, 2008; Carrilio, 2007; Hall, 1996; Pandey, 1998; Surak & Rogge, 2005) and on the international level, there is a growing awareness of the importance of ecological challenges and sustainable development for the profession (International Federation of Social Workers, IFSW, 2011).

**The challenge of sustainable development**

The alarming statistics on the ecological devastation of planet Earth and the global social and economic crisis has raised fundamental concerns about the relation between the ecological crisis and social problems which has been referred to as a ‘social-ecological crisis’ (Peeters, 2009). Human consumption raises questions of sustainability in that natural resources are finite and, in some instances, beyond repair or regeneration. According to the
Living Planet Report (World Wide Fund For Nature, WWP, 2010), in 2007 the global ecological footprint already exceeded what planet Earth could provide by 50 per cent. This overuse and depletion of resources, and the burden of environmental pollution, was unequally distributed across continents and countries as well as within countries due to the growing gap between the rich and the poor (UNDP, 2010). Policies aimed at redistributing wealth had to take account of this ‘social-ecological crisis’ given the finite nature of the Earth’s resources. More than 20 years ago, the Belgian philosopher Vermeersch (1988) formulated this problem as an impasse of our global social system:

As long as the present-day world system is maintained, there is no other possibility than to navigate between two rocks. The larger the part of the world population that lives in prosperity, the more the ecosystem is in danger; the more the ecosystem is safeguarded, the more it is allied with unlimited misery (author’s translation). (p. 41)

The current overconsumption can be attributed to the growth economy, but also to sociocultural norms and expectations in late-modern society (Jackson, 2009). The challenge of satisfying human needs while preserving Earth’s biophysical boundaries or ‘natural capital’ lies at the core of the sustainability debate. Sustainable development then requires at least achieving the following conditions: (i) a dematerialisation of the economy, which means a substantial reduction in the input and throughput of natural resources including energy (Jones & Jacobs, 2006; Rodrigues, Domingos & Conceição, 2005); (ii) the fair distribution of wealth; and (iii) a new vision of human and planetary well-being. This essentially is the crux of ‘new paradigm’ thinking.

Taken together, the achievement of these conditions means a ‘transition’ to a sustainable society, which requires changes in all aspects of society: ecological, technological, economic, social, political, structural-institutional and parallel changes in the most important subsystems of society: energy production and consumption, the monetary systems, the mobility pattern of people, food production and distribution, and the organisation of labour and care systems (Jones & De Meyere, 2009; Spratt, Ryan-Collins, Neitzert & Simms, 2009). Thus, understood as a ‘social transition’, sustainable development is a complex process of social change and asks for a combination of strategies, including those most cited: efficiency, redistribution and sufficiency (Peeters, 1997; Sachs, 1999). The dominant discourse on sustainable development places a strong emphasis on efficiency, thus on dematerialisation through alternative technologies for production and consumption. However, a transition to sustainability is not simply a question of better care for the biophysical environment, but also concerns the quality of society in many respects. Thus the social and cultural conditions for such a transition must be taken into account. Strategies for the redistribution of wealth, especially in terms of resource use, are of primary importance in creating a just society. Wilkinson and Pickett’s (2009) empirical study shows a strong relationship between greater equality and the quality of a society, for the better-off as well. This undermines the dominant neoliberal idea that competitiveness and generous rewards for winners are the basis for a good society. On the contrary, equality has a direct impact on the question of well-being and facilitates the search for alternative interpretations of it.

A sustainable vision of well-being, a crucial issue for social work, is decisive for a way out of the social impasse, because it has got to do with the everyday expectations of people that drive society. We have to search for an alternative to the dominant idea that well-being follows primarily from material prosperity and economic growth. The ecological solution has
been to seek ways to learn to live within certain limits – sufficiency – which implies the need for developing new ideas of a good life. This quest is supported by recent studies that undermine the supposed link between well-being and a high ecological footprint (Abdallah, Thompson, Michaelson, Marks, & Steuer, 2009). A good life is possible without harming the Earth’s ecosystems (Jackson, 2009; Simms & Smith, 2008). It involves enhancing the quality not only of human–human but also human–nature relationships and invites reconsideration of: (i) the notion of ‘emancipation’ and its relationship to labour and consumption; (ii) the meaning of ‘citizenship’ and ‘having rights’; and (iii) the kind of activities valued as ‘meaningful participation’ in society (Peeters, 2010b). This necessitates a radical cultural change – a major paradigm shift. In proposing this paradigm change, ecologists and environmentalists claim to the notion of ‘human rights’ as an essential element of ‘ecological justice’, embedding these modern ideas within the new paradigm. Components include:

1. An ‘ecological’ worldview based on complexity and diversity rather than the modernist model of linear causality, which foregrounds system-based theoretical insights (Coates, 2003; Walker & Salt, 2006).
2. Recognition of Earth’s biophysical boundaries and limited resources necessitating alternative – solar – energy sources.
3. An ‘ecological economy’ capable of satisfying human needs while protecting the physical environment (Daly, 2008; Jones & Jacobs, 2006; Martinez-Alier, 2002).
4. A view of the global world system as a complex network of layered systems, with the economy ‘embedded’ in society and society in the ecosystem Earth (Daly, 1999, 2008).
5. A ‘relational’ worldview in terms of which all life forms are interdependent and have a ‘shared destiny’ where people are considered intrinsically (eco)social beings, that is, they gain their identity through their relationships with other people and with the world. As such, the human individual is not the centre of his or her own universe but a ‘decentred subject’. For Peeters (2010b), a ‘decentred subject’ coheres with the ecological understanding of human needs as relative to relations with other humans, with other species and with the Earth.
6. An ecological ethics embracing an ethics of care as complementary to a deontological rights-based ethics. From its relational view of the person, the foundation of rights in the autonomy of the subject has to be reinterpreted from an idea of ‘autonomy in connectedness’ (Peeters, 2010b).

Sustainable development and social work: a common agenda

The previous analysis of the current social-ecological crisis starts from the facts and indicates that issues of sustainable development are of direct concern for social work. The question ‘what part social work can play in sustainable development’ ties immediately to normative considerations. To link the mission of social work with the agenda of sustainable development, the definition of the latter in Our Common Future, also known as the Brundtland Report (World Commission on Environment and Development, WCED, 1987), is a good starting-point: It has been widely accepted as the most important reference for environmentally friendly social policy (Baker, 2006). It claims:
Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts: the concept of ‘needs’, in particular the essential needs of the world’s poor, to which priority should be given; and the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment’s ability to meet present and future needs. (World Commission on Environment and Development, WCED, 1987, p. 43)

This vague definition has two provisos: prioritising the needs of the poor and accepting the finite nature of Earth’s resources. Minimally, sustainable development is ‘maintaining a positive process of social change’ (Baker, 2006, p. 26) with a global perspective that concerns the needs of people and, therefore, takes account of the dimensions of space – where they are located – and the historical junctures in their location’s development. Our Common Future gave rise to heated debate about the interpretations of sustainable development across various locations and fundamentally different – philosophical, ideological and political – views on issues of ecological boundaries, equality and distribution, and strategies to address the ‘social-ecological crisis’ (Baker, 2006; Dresner, 2008; Peeters, 1997; Sachs, 1993, 1999; Sneddon, Howarth & Norgaard, 2006). In short, sustainable development is defined from various interest-oriented points of view. Thus it is essentially a ‘political concept’, a contested area of social discourse on the direction of society (Baker, 2006; Lafferty, 1995; Peeters, 2009, 2010b). As part of the ongoing discussion, this article proposes an interpretation of sustainable development that is suitable for social work.

A major issue is the dominant association of ‘development’ with economic growth, which in combination with ‘sustainable’ would constitute a contradiction (Jones & Jacobs, 2006; Peeters, 1997; Sachs 1993). An ecological approach attempts to clarify this issue in terms of natural resources, and concerns the question of the extent to which ‘natural capital’ may be replaced by ‘produced capital’ as a result of economic growth. ‘Strong’ sustainable development is consistent with the basic idea of ‘limits to growth’ (Meadows, Meadows, Randers & Behrens, 1972) of the environmental movement in the 1970s, and states that there is no development without sustainability. ‘Weak’ sustainable development assumes that there is no sustainability without development and opts rather for a strategy of ‘the growth of limits’ (Sachs, 1993). Through gains in efficiency, growth could be decoupled from the use of natural capital, or ‘green growth’ could reconcile the requirements of sustainability with the neoliberal market-oriented development model (Baker, 2006; Jones & Jacobs, 2006). Even if efficiency gains were to deliver a relative decoupling of commodity production from the use of natural resources, efficiency, as such, would not lead to an absolute decline in commodity production, which is what is needed given the current overuse of resources. So far, there is no indication that the decoupling of economic growth and environmental impact is possible (Jackson, 2009). Thus, all data argue for ‘strong’ sustainable development, for both the conservation and restoration of natural capital.

Ecological justice holds to an equal right of access to ecological resources as a common responsibility for all nations, but not every nation has the same responsibility in view of historical and current environmental impacts. Thus the efforts for the restoration of
natural capital have to be differentiated between nations. For the negotiations on the reduction of carbon emissions, the Global Commons Institute (2011) developed the idea of a process of ‘contraction and convergence’. But this is also used as a general principle to combine a process of ‘dematerialisation of the global economy’ with a ‘just distribution of welfare’ (Jones & Jacobs, 2006). A rather fast decrease in the use of resources by the economies of the industrialised countries is the contraction process. This still leaves room for some growth in the rest of the world. In the longer term though, the intention is a sustainable and more equal pattern of use of resources, and so of environmental impact. That is the convergence process.

But what has to be restored and protected? A vision of natural capital as ‘global commons’ that are best off with global management could threaten the sustainable livelihoods of local people in favour of the benefits of the global middle class (Peeters, 1997; Sachs, 1993, 1996, 1999). If sustainable development should prioritise the poor, distribution issues must be considered in terms of access to resources as the basis of sustainable livelihoods. This demands attention and respect for the diversity of forms of life at various places on Earth. This way of looking at issues of distribution and redistribution features prominently in concepts such as ‘environmental’ or ‘ecological justice’ (Agyeman, 2005; Debruyne & Peeters, 2010; Sachs, 2003; Shiva, 2008), ‘environmentalism of the poor’ (Martinez-Alier, 2002), ‘ecological debt’ (Paredis, Goeminne, Vanhove, Maes, & Lambrechts, 2009; Simms, 2009), and ‘just sustainability’ (Agyeman, Bullard & Evans, 2003; Jones & Jacobs, 2006; Jones & De Meyere, 2009). In a similar way, sustainable development must be open to a gender-sensitive identification of needs (Baker, 2006).

During the UN-process about sustainable development, many normative principles came to the fore. How then does this affect social work? Drawing on the profession’s mission statement as articulated in its international definition and corresponding statement of principles (International Federation of Social Workers & International Association of Schools of Social Work (IFSW & IASSW, 2004), Table 2 compares the normative commitments of sustainable development and social work (Peeters, 2009).

Despite an obvious absence of attention to ecological norms in the international definition of social work (IFSW & IASSW, 2004), there is normative concurrence between social work and sustainable development in terms of attention to well-being, equality, human rights and participation, which gives rise to possibilities for each to reinforce the another. First of all social work has to actually broaden its contextual ambit to embrace ecological concerns and the Earth’s biophysical boundaries; questions of ecological justice; access to, the quality of and fair distribution of natural resources; a critical attitude towards consumerism; concerns with spatial planning, the quality of living conditions and the importance of the natural environment for human well-being. The idea of a ‘paradigm shift’ implies an in-depth learning process to correct the one-sided human-centred focus of the profession. This starts with convincing middle-class social workers based mainly in urban environments why sustainable development is of ethical and political concern for them. The question of the extent to which non-human concerns are of significance for social work also arises (see Gray & Coates in this issue). Social work’s focus on the ‘social’ can reinforce the social dimension and participative practices of sustainable development and its focus on questions of redistribution and the emancipation and empowerment of people and communities (Gamble & Hoff, forthcoming; Peeters, 2010b, 2011ab).
Table 2. Comparison of normative principles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sustainable development</th>
<th>Social work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction of human needs</td>
<td>Enhancement of human well-being: This implies the satisfaction of needs but has a broader focus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepts ecological limits – the Earth’s finite resources</td>
<td>Concern and respect for the Earth’s finite resources is not yet a core concern in social work discourse and depends on how notions of human well-being are understood across locations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common but differentiated responsibilities - in the first place between nations - results from general principles of fairness</td>
<td>In the ethics of empowerment, social work holds people accountable for their actions, but fairness implies attention to the different possibilities and limits of people, both individuals and groups. Social work believes the state has a role in providing for its citizens.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global justice though there are divergent conceptions of exactly what this entails</td>
<td>Social work is aligned with the goal of global justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intragenerational equity and solidarity</td>
<td>Social work extols social solidarity, diversity and empowerment, especially with disadvantaged and marginalised populations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intergenerational equity and solidarity: responsibility for future generations is an innovative principle</td>
<td>This principle is compatible with social work’s concern with people’s futures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active participation of citizens is seen as crucial to sustainable development</td>
<td>Active participation of service users is highly valued in social work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender equality and respect for diversity</td>
<td>Social work promotes gender equality and respect for diversity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Peeters (2009: 33)

Sustainable development in the picture

Given the political character of sustainable development, an appropriate popular representation is pivotal to the establishment of the described environmentally friendly social agenda. Sustainable development is most commonly understood as the interaction of three dimensions – the social, the ecological and the economic – embodied in the much-used notion of the ‘triple bottom line’ (Elkington, 1998) or ‘triple P’: people, planet and prosperity or profit as fundamental to a framework for sustainable development. Following the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 2002, the United Nations has promoted the notion of ‘prosperity’ over ‘profit’ in order to indicate the social finality of the economy (European Commission, 2002). Since sustainable development is about social change, a fourth P – of ‘process’ – has been added to denote an emphasis on popular ‘participation’ (Baker, 2006). These dimensions of sustainable development are often viewed as social, ecological, and economic as well as ‘human’ and ‘financial’ capital.
(Parkin, 2010). Hence sustainable development is often represented as a triangle or as three overlapping circles. Sustainable development is located in the central overlap as a balanced integration of the three dimensions (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1: The triple bottom line](image1)

However, this depiction is misleading because it gives equal weight to each dimension and thus fails to account for ecological limits and allows economic interests to continue to dominate. It supports a vision of ‘weak’ sustainable development. In accordance with an ecological worldview and with the basic framework of ecological economics (see Daly 1999, 2008), a systemic model: (i) embeds the economic and the social in the ecosystem making the economy a – serving – part of society (Parkin, 2010); and (ii) as intrinsically relational, has no centre thus encouraging society to adopt a more humble attitude towards Earth’s ecosystem (see Figure 2).

![Figure 2: Three dimensions of sustainable development](image2)
The ecological model in Figure 2 situates sustainable development in a more realistic framework supporting a vision of ‘strong’ sustainable development in that it allows the ecosystem to limit the economy and society. And this should not be understood only in material terms: within the new paradigm nature can have meaning beyond economic and social interests. Further, Figure 2 reflects how ecological, social and economic issues are intrinsically related. Economic production – as well as human behaviour towards the natural environment – is a socially and culturally mediated process, hence the location of the social between the economic and ecological spheres. The mediating position of the social sphere indicates the importance of social – and political – action in the sustainability transition. For example the contribution of economy to sustainable development may be seen as a cooperative action between responsible business and other social actors (as illustrated by Roome, 2008) (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Sustainable development according to Roome (2008)**

**Sustainable development and ecosocial work**

This ecological model of sustainable development coheres with social work’s ecosystems thinking, despite the absence in social work of the biophysical environment, as discussed earlier in the article. To bridge social work with sustainable development, the framing of social problems as ‘ecosocial’ is only a step, building upon the recognition of the broad agenda mentioned. But in the current political and economic context, the real challenge is the transformation of society, and the question is how social work can engage with such a process of profound social change. This requires, first of all, that social work has to leave its position of a ‘domesticated’ profession (Coates, 2003) and become more a ‘transformational’ social work (Payne, 2006) with a focus on both structural and cultural social change. This requires a willingness to join social movements to reach political ends, and to engage in a profound process of ‘social learning’ (Van Poeck, Vandenabeele & Wildermersch, 2010; Wals, 2007) to divert people from the road to ‘unsustainability’ towards the lesser-known path to sustainability in many fields: production and consumption, way of living and way of life, mobility, leisure activities, travel or behaviour towards open
spaces and nature and so on. These learning processes are part of attempts to bring interventions into line with the ecosocial context. Therefore, also methods of participatory research, for example social impact assessments, are of crucial importance for social workers and service users – or community members (Matthies et al., 2001; Närhi, 2001, 2004; Raymaekers, 2010). In the development of new practices, social work can make use of strategies of interdisciplinary multilevel cooperative action, including empowering people, building resilience and developing social capital (Peeters, 2010b, 2011ab). Figure 3 presents the contribution of the economy to sustainable development and Figure 4 depicts the contribution of social work as another social actor.

Figure 4: Sustainable development and social work

The social-ecological crisis will effect a social transition anyway, for better or for worse. It is important for ecosocial interventions (Coates, 2003; Gamble & Hoff, forthcoming; Hoff & McNutt, 1994, 1998; Matthies et al., 2001; Peeters, 2010a) to first mitigate the negative effects of changes that have already taken place. This involves, first, the preservation of well-being as people experience environmental pollution and destruction of resources (health, insufficient food and water, poor quality habitat), rising prices of food, energy, housing and mobility (hunger, debts, and homelessness), declining quality or shortages of farmland (migration and refugees) and so on. This is in line with traditional social work and will remain important, but for a positive process of sustainable development, change-oriented ecosocial interventions are needed, and that means both preparing people for change, and participating in change. In practice, the distinction is not always sharp, but knowing that many things have to be done simultaneously and at various levels, it is especially important to be consciously developing interventions that mitigate impacts that are connected with change-oriented interventions.

In preparing for change, social work has to create situations that both help overcome difficulties and work on the conditions for a sustainable future, which implies building social capital and resilience (Peeters, 2010b). This includes educational programmes for a better understanding of life situation and its relationship to the environment, and for the development of capabilities and skills that help people to get better control over their lives: sustainable consumption, energy conservation, healthy cooking of sustainable food,
gardening, crafts and so on. In addition, social work can create contexts that bring people together, build networks and make more structural answers possible. Work with individual clients and families can be attached to networking and community building – for example, through organising educational programmes under the form of group work. Various forms of social economy, where sustainable production and services and social objectives go hand in hand, play a crucial role: neighbourhood services, sheltered workshops – for repair and recycling, community-supported agriculture, community gardens, social eco-farms, sustainable catering and mobility services. The perspective is to anchor social enterprises – locally and regionally – that will eventually help to provide food security and other essential needs, which corresponds to the insight that a modular structure is important for the resilience of social-ecological systems (Lietaer, Ulanowicz & Goerner, 2009; Walker & Salt, 2006). Such a bottom-up approach should be supported by interventions at the macro level. A central problem is that the economy in its current form is not stable if it is not growing, and so depends on increasing consumption. However, a macroeconomic model that is independent of growth would be possible (Jackson, 2009).

In addition, the social conditions of a sustainable society must be addressed structurally. The guarantee of basic rights requires a global redistribution of access to resources both between and within countries. Also the further development of international solidarity institutions remains necessary to compensate temporary or permanent weaknesses of local economies. Social work can contribute through advocacy with governments, but even more by building networks and coalitions with social movements within civil society. An appropriate step is to organise clients and residents in social movements, such as the environmental justice movements (Agyeman et al., 2003; Debruyne & Peeters, 2010) or movements of poor people (see example below). In this way, social workers can participate in both the resistance to the business as usual of growth society, and in the thinking and learning for alternative perspectives. Social work organisations in different countries must, in the first instance, analyse their relation to civil society, the current discussions and positions therein, and the right allies to align with. This must also be done on the international level.

Building these networks is both a preparation for change, and the way to participate in change. Opposition to the present society must go together with a shared creative imagining of a future society as Leitbild for actions to be developed (Jones & Demeyere, 2009). With that as a starting point, social work can also contribute through conscious experiments based on new principles of social and economic organisation. For example, projects in the social economy could develop principles of corporate social responsibility so that they become of lasting significance for economics; social concerns could give new impetus to cooperative forms of enterprise; and experiments with complementary currency systems (Lietaer et al., 2009) could make local communities less dependent on the dominant monetary system. In addition, social work has to be present in projects of public transportation, of redesigning cities and distribution systems and rethinking labour organisation and valuation.

Concrete interventions will greatly depend on the ecosocial context. Samenlevingsopbouw Vlaanderen (Community Building Flanders, Belgium), an organisation supporting community projects by study and training (Hautekeur, 2010), provides a concrete example. The project ‘Energy and Poverty’ (Clymans, 2010) started in 1998 to find solutions to problems of energy supply to poor people. The liberalisation of the energy
market in Europe from 2003 exacerbated the problem. In the project, people in poverty work as experts, due to their experience, and voluntarily work with a small group of social workers in participatory research to map energy problems and, subsequently, to prepare policy proposals for their solution. Their starting point is energy as a basic right for everyone. A core group, the E-team, is doing preparatory work, but the monthly national project meeting is the heart of the project. The majority of participants are people in poverty, but to enhance the support for policy-oriented recommendations the group seeks collaboration with partners from civil society and service organisations that also can join the meeting, for example: Flemish Network of associations where the poor have their say; the umbrella of the environmental movement Bond Beter Leefmilieu; Welzijnszorg, a welfare NGO; Centre for the fight against poverty, insecurity and social exclusion; Children's Law Commissioner; Federation of Flemish social welfare social workers; and the Christian labour movement Algemeen Christelijk Werknemersverbond. From this strength, the project has been able to give advice to the energy committee of the Flemish Parliament and the minister of energy. That line of work is also related to other interventions. For example, a group 'Energy and living quality' encourages and recommends the policy of local and national government to improve the energy quality of accommodations for social housing. On the other hand, people are trained and helped in taking energy-saving measures themselves. An important context factor is the Flemish legislation on local social policy which requires, for policy formation, that social support and service organisations cross boundaries and work together. This opens opportunities to work together on energy issues and to develop other ecosocial interventions.

**Conclusion**

Today’s social-ecological crisis indicates that our global social system is in a deadlock. Society is facing major changes that will touch many aspects of our lives. Sustainable development requires that society play a significant role in this major transformation. Social work should not stand aside; moreover, there are opportunities to engage in this transformative process provided it adopts an ecosocial approach based on social-ecological systems thinking and framed within a broad critical, political-ethical agenda. The complexity of a social transition asks for action on various levels and within a complex network of social relations. To ensure resilience for social change, social work may contribute through enhancing capabilities of people and building social capital. Community building, networking and alliances with other social actors have a pivotal role in a change-oriented social work practice. In addition, developing new social-economic relations through bottom-up economic projects is crucial for a just and sustainable future.
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